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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000638

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LO](#) [MARR](#) [KIVR](#)
SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL DINNER WITH PRIME
MINISTER FICO

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee, for Reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary. Prime Minister Robert Fico hosted a farewell dinner for Ambassador Vallee on December 2. Interior Minister Kalinak, Speaker of the Parliament Pavol Paska, and the Prime Minister's Director of Foreign Relations, Marek Estok, also attended the dinner. The tone of the conversation was frank and very cordial; the substance reflected PM Fico's thorough preoccupation with domestic politics. Fico, Kalinak and Paska had each appeared on television throughout the day to contest opposition leader Mikulas Dzurinda's accusations of impropriety in connection with a 2002 land purchase by Fico. Fico angrily noted that he would file libel charges against Dzurinda and described the recent opposition attacks on himself and Parliament Speaker Paska as "unprecedented." Fico also spoke frankly about his recent battles with Vladimir Meciar, referring to him alternately as a "beaten dog" and dangerous. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister would prefer to see the current coalition hold until 2010, but not, as he said publicly, at any price. Regardless of the timing of elections, he predicts that they will likely produce a two-party coalition led by Smer.

¶2. (C) On Kosovo, Fico commented that EU heads of government felt enormous pressure to reach a unified position (including on recognition) on Kosovo. This would be very difficult, he added, in the event of a unilateral declaration on the part of the Kosovars. In response to the Ambassador's thorough update on U.S. Missile Defense consultations, the Prime Minister claimed that he would not be very engaged in the topic, but states his personal views when asked by the press. Fico inquired about the status of discussion on Missile Defense in NATO and stated clearly -- drawing parallels to U.S. intelligence failures on Iraq -- that he does not believe that the ballistic missile threat affects Central Europe. End Summary.

Domestic Politics: Constant Turbulence

¶3. (C) Fico, Paska and Kalinak provided colorful and at times humorous accounts of various pivotal moments in recent the Smer-HZDS land fund drama. "Meciar is a beaten dog and we will continue to beat him day and night," commented Fico. When asked by the Ambassador whether Meciar might, at this point, be more interested in exacting revenge for his public comeuppance than in remaining in the coalition, Fico agreed, adding that Meciar was both clever and dangerous. In fact, Fico and Paska asserted that HZDS was the source of Dzurinda's claims that Fico's purchase in 2002 of a small

vineyard was an example of the very same sort of crooked transaction which he himself had just condemned. (Comment: More than one opposition politician has confirmed that HZDS was behind Dzurinda's attack. However, the information that has come to light to date does not make a compelling case of wrongdoing on the part of the Prime Minister. End Comment.) Paska added that HZDS deputies had even stated (stupidly) publicly that the reason the party had not joined Smer and SNS in blocking the opposition's recall attempt last week was to exact "revenge" on Smer. Throughout the dispute, Fico had reached out to HZDS deputies, giving rise to speculation that he could woo enough MPs away from the party (6-7) so that he could govern without Meciar. The Prime Minister said he had rejected this path because he concluded that while these renegade MPs would vote with Smer initially, there would likely be an unacceptable price attached to their subsequent support.

¶4. (C) In spite of the drama and distractions, Fico claimed that he would prefer to maintain the current coalition until the 2010 elections. "It is our responsibility to govern, so we will try to keep the coalition together," he commented. The Prime Minister also predicted that once Meciar had left the political stage the bulk of HZDS voters would join Smer.

After the next elections, Fico opined, it was likely that Sme would govern with only one other partner, possibly the Slovak National Party (SNS) or the Christian Democrats (KDH).

Speaker Paska, who, contrary to his boss favors early elections, responded with a ringing "no" to the possibility of a Smer-SDKU partnership. Implicitly drawing a contrast between the success of his social democratic approach and the unpopularity of Dzurinda's reformist agenda, Fico mentioned that he had just opened another state-funded community soccer field. (The government plans to open another 150 next year.) According to Fico, Dzurinda could have undertaken easily such

initiatives, but he either didn't understand or didn't care about the impact such programs had on public opinion. As for Dzurinda's current opposition tactics, e.g., his insistence on pursuing a recall of Fico following expected passage of both the budget and a motion of confidence in the government, Fico expressed contempt and anger. He confirmed that he would bring charges against Dzurinda for making false claims against him on the land deal. Apropos of false claims, Fico added that the government was pursuing actively legislation aimed at forcing the press to publish the government's response to reports its deems inaccurate. (Comment: Such a move would be widely view as a step backwards. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) Although Fico asserted that Smer has been very successful in creating a coherent center-left movement in Slovakia, he acknowledged that the party needed to broaden further its social democratic base and message. To that end, Smer had recently signed an agreement with the Greens. Fico hopes the parties can find mutually acceptable policy initiatives -- aimed in particular at the youth vote -- that could be incorporated in the Smer platform. It remains to be seen, he concluded, whether SDKU and the other opposition parties could consolidate the center-right space in a similar fashion.

Kosovo, Missile Defense and the Euro

¶6. (C) In response to the Ambassador's call for U.S.-EU unity on Kosovo in the weeks and months ahead, PM Fico responded that while Slovakia would not recognize a unilateral declaration of independence, he did not believe that Kosovo was an issue of importance for the Slovak people. Recalling conversations with other EU leaders, however, he emphasized the great importance they attached to reaching a unified EU position on Kosovo, including on the question of recognition. On missile defense, Fico claimed that although he was not engaged in the issue, he provided his personal views when asked by the press. Fico did not pose any questions following the Ambassador's thorough briefing on the status of consultations in NATO and Russia. Instead, he harked back to

U.S. claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and said that he, like his friend Czech opposition leader Paroubek, would need to see convincing proof of a threat to Central Europe before he would be willing to support plans for missile defense. Fico was more animated on the topic of his travel the following day to Brussels to lobby for Slovakia's entry into the Eurozone. He expressed confidence that Slovakia was on track, but noted that he and Finance Minister Pociatek needed to convince Brussels that the GOS was committed to a path of fiscal responsibility and restraint that would enable it to sustain inflation rates and other Maastricht criteria.

VALLEE